

THE ENGLISH LEAFLET

THE NEW ENGLAND
ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

ORGANIZED FEBRUARY 28, 1901

WALTER S. HINCHMAN, PRESIDENT

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THE ENGLISH LEAFLET is published by the New England Association of Teachers of English, every month except July, August, and September. Subscription price, One Dollar. Editor, Charles Swain Thomas, Newtonville, Mass.; Secretary-Treasurer, A. B. De Mille, Milton, Mass.

VOL. XIX.

APRIL 1918

NUMBER 153

THEMES FOR A READING PUBLIC

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When a teacher appears before other teachers and tells them what he himself has been doing, his presence usually implies that he has been caught in the act of doing something out of the ordinary. But I shall not attempt to conceal the absence of striking originality from the experiment which I have been asked to outline. There is nothing about it to startle the conservative or to appease the radical. The fundamental idea on which it is based, namely, the validity in education of the principle of live communication between student and student, the value of the quickening and corrective force exerted by an audience in the class room, the need of a public ear for public utterance, is common enough among teachers, particularly among those who have conducted courses in public speaking and oral English. Applying that idea to written composition, the plan secures a reading public for themes, and aims to develop in each individual writer the sense of being a special contributor to that public of reading matter that is worthy of its attention and regard. It goes about to set up a state of mind, from which may be drawn as great a stimulus as conditions shall permit to the performance of a difficult and important task.

Many of us, I presume, sensible of a certain lack of vitality in the procedure which calls for regular themes to be handed in, corrected, returned, and revised, do from time to time endeavor to create a fictitious reading public, often composed of a single imaginary or very remote individual

toward whom the writer may direct the expression of his thought. Of all such happy artifices the letter is perhaps the most familiar. "Write a letter to the Kaiser, telling him exactly what you think. Make him feel it."—"Write a letter describing the charm of a New England winter to a little friend living in Southern California. Strive to make her share your enjoyment." These devices are good, and have, it must be owned, resulted in some very spirited writing; yet has not the resourceful teacher now and then entertained the suspicion that where he has attempted to vitalize he has only galvanized? There is sometimes an air of artificiality and detachment about the whole proceeding that will not be dispelled. There is no real reaction and response. The Kaiser continues to remain annoyingly indifferent to enemy opinion; and the little friend in Southern California, if indeed she exists at all, proves to have been born and bred no farther away than western Massachusetts. And, after all, why rely on far-away incitements to endeavor? Why be content to make shift with remote and disembodied personalities for a reading public when there is a real and living one at hand?

Language has been defined as "the vehicle of vocabulary for the conveyance of ideas." I must say that I like that definition, better, indeed, than many another more formally expressed. By throwing the stress upon "vehicle" and "conveyance," it implies the necessity of transportation from producer to consumer, and places upon the user of the mother tongue the obligation to deliver the commodity that he has to offer. And so, without ignoring, for certain uses, that definition which says that composition is the art of putting ideas together, I think there is an immense practical advantage in insisting that it is, in a very dignified sense, the art of putting ideas across, of getting them over to those who are ready and glad to receive them, or will be ready and glad to receive them if they are of sufficient interest and value and are expressed with sufficient life and force. Therefore I would speak in this spirit to the writer of themes: "Young man, here is an audience in the class room, a genuine reading public, disposed to give you an appreciative hearing if you really have something to say and really know how to say it. Can you enlighten it with the thing you know? Can you touch it with the thing you feel? Can you convince it with the thing you believe? Interest it; entertain it; stimulate it—do anything you like except mislead it or befuddle it or

bore it. You are not writing in a vacuum—or for a vacuum. What you write will not have to waste its sweetness or its vigor on the desert air of a teacher's critical judgment. Here is an immediate human object to aim at; now hit the mark."

In order to insure such a reading public, I have, without, as I said before, wholly originating it, adopted the following plan. Having senior classes of from twenty to twenty-two boys, I have divided each into to equal sections, designated for convenience Section A and Section B. These sections write fortnightly themes, usually outside of the class room, A for the first Monday, B, for the second, A for the third, and so on alternately throughout the period during which the work is continued. One week after the members of a section have written and handed in their themes, which during the interval I have carefully corrected and returned, each one reads his theme aloud before the entire class, taking his position at the front of the room. When he has finished, he is greeted by applause, usually inspired by approval, though sometimes by courtesy. As soon as all the themes prepared for that day have been read aloud, a vote is taken by ballot to determine which one, in the judgment of the greatest number of the audience, was best, and which second best. The basis of judgment is this: "Which theme presented the most interesting and valuable subject matter in the most effective way?" When the ballots have been counted, the results are posted on a bulletin board, and, later, the card on which the record for each section is written, signed with the teacher's name, is given to the winner of first place as a certificate of his accomplishment. The original grades of the first and second winning themes are increased, on the principle that an essential test of effective writing is the power to secure an appreciative response from the reader or hearer. As for the balloting, there is, it must be admitted, a sort of rough justice in it, but I have been very much gratified to observe how seldom the general opinion goes very far wrong. The boys certainly show a great deal of interest in the votes, gathering around the bulletin board when the results are posted, to see who won.

The use of an excellent combination stereopticon and reflectoscope has done much to excite interest in writer and reader alike. With the aid of this instrument, many of the boys deliver what are, in effect, brief illustrated

lectures, and sometimes show considerable skill in coördinating their pictures with their text. Glass slides are used when they can be procured, but for the most part post cards, many of them beautifully colored, pictures cut from magazines and newspapers, and even diagrams, maps, and drawings made by the boys themselves—some of them with remarkable cleverness—serve the purpose almost as well. This lantern is not a toy, nor does it merely tickle the fancy or please the eye with pretty pictures. This public of which I am speaking is rarely deceived by pictorial illustration if the accompanying text is lifeless and dull. Apart from helping to excite interest, the lantern has proved to have been seriously employed toward the end of realization, one of the most important general purpose in education. If I could not get another, it would take the most forcible persuasion to make me part with this.

This practice of writing for a public has stimulated immensely the choice of subjects that are interesting and worth while. Almost nothing that is really trivial is produced at all. The search for subject matter has become a search for something that will gain a hearing, something that will really go. The writer may select almost anything he likes, always with the thought in mind that he is to present to his public,—may draw upon his original experience, his fancy, his observation, his accumulated knowledge—and some boys have an amazing fund in certain fields—or upon books, magazines, or newspapers. When material from books, magazines, and newspapers is used, I require a definite reference to the source, in order to see if the information and ideas have been properly assimilated and not handled in a slavish and mechanical fashion—and to repair my own lack of universal knowledge.

A large proportion of the subject matter is drawn from these sources. The record which I have kept of them shows the following titles: *The Boston Herald*, *Boston Evening Transcript*, *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The World's Work*, *The Red Cross Magazine*, *Current Opinion*, *The Scientific American*, *The Popular Science Monthly*, *The National Geographic Magazine*, *Survey*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Outlook*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The American Review of Reviews*, *The Literary Digest*, not to mention several others.

A program of one hour's performance will serve to indicate the character of the subjects chosen:—

The War behind the Lines.

Some Effective Cartoons, (Illustrated.)

The Dissolution of the Russian Armies.

A Faithful German.

Filling the Sugar Bowl (an exposition of the manufacture of beet sugar. Illustrated.)

The Escape of a Belgian Prisoner.

Naples and Its Surroundings (Illustrated.)

The Whale as a Food Factor.

The Wild Turkey and How It is Hunted.

The Part Played by the Automobile in America.

And so it goes, Monday after Monday—tanks and torpedoes; aeroplanes, Zeppelins, and super-Zeppelins; Red Cross Work and Blue Cross Work; carrier pigeons, spiders, and edible reptiles; the problem of Middle Europe, and the Berlin to Bagdad Railroad; original stories, original poems; mountains and volcanoes, geysers and hot springs; the Hudson River, the Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon of Arizona; painting and sculpture; the Parthenon and the Roman Forum; advice to the Administration on the conduct of the war and the unshakable foundations of a lasting peace. "What should they know of English," I have asked myself in the class room, "who only English know?"

This plan does not save the labor and time of theme-correcting and conference, but it infuses a new spirit into both. The theme critic rises above the station of the fellow with the red ink; he sits in the editor's chair; and becomes the purveyor of good reading to the public. Themes are transformed into "copy," which must be made to meet the requisite standard and rendered available for publication. Performing this function of editor, he discovers before long a change in his critical point of view. He begins to use a different critical language. Instead of employing the old formulas, "Lacking in clearness," "Lacking in coherence," "Lacking in emphasis," he finds himself saying: "This will not be clear to those who listen to you" "The lack of obvious connection here will puzzle the hearer." "If you let this feeble language stand, or close with such abruptness, you will fail of the impression that you wish to make." It is obvious, of course, that comments of this sort do not apply to every matter needing correction; some matters must be criticized purely on their own merit still. But where they do apply, they are readily appreciated, for they confront the writer with a condition rather than a theory.

You have in mind, no doubt, certain incidental benefits that arise from such a plan as I have been discussing,—incidental but of such importance that some of them are almost as much worth consideration as the chief end in view: the habit of a simple sort of independent research; the employment of certain collateral talents, such as the ability to draw or to contrive other more or less ingenious means of illustration; training in clear enunciation, correct pronunciation, and a generally effective oral delivery; the development of self-confidence and poise that comes from standing before an audience and looking it in the face; the ultimate salutary effect on writing of repeatedly hearing what one has written uttered in the tones of the living voice; larger contacts with the various world about us, accomplished through the mutual sharing of the results of reading, observation, and experience; the awakening of at least some slight degree of social consciousness: the sense that all are coöperating for a common end—a community of purpose founded upon the communication of experience, knowledge, imagination, and thought.

These by-products are of value; but they are only by-products of the main intention, which is, first and last, to look on composition in its habit as it lives. To say that no man writeth unto himself alone would certainly be to utter more than the truth; some do write chiefly for the writing's sake. And just as certainly, the best way for any one to write is the way in which he writes best. But the normal conditions of composition for the average person—and for many persons above the average, for that matter,—are those which contemplate a public of one kind or another, whose interest and judgment and response are formative and even inspiring influences.

The ends of speaking set forth in that charming compound of quaint pedantry and good counsel. Campbell's *Rhetoric*,—"to enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, and to influence the will,"—are lofty and ideal purposes, no doubt, their fullest exaction not to be met by students in the class room. But, when rightly considered and applied, they formulate a principle of composition which is sound in theory and, in practice, not beyond the reach of boys and girls; they help to determine a point of view, that, on the whole, writing, to achieve the fullest success, must have not only a subject but an immediate object as well.

The plan is not in ingenious invention for the conserva-

tion of energy. In employing it, I have not tried to make things interesting by making them easy, or, indeed, to make things easy by making them interesting; but have attempted, rather, to make the difficult work of composition so vital that it shall seem more worth while. And in this, though I have had to be satisfied with approximations to an ideal attainment, I think that I have secured a fair measure of success. I have not progressed beyond the experimental stage. There are faults to be corrected, improvements to be made. I have no statistics or measurements to present, no plea to make to those who know a better way. But, as I watch the operation of this experiment and consider its results, and particularly the interest that it has awakened in many students, I am convinced of its soundness and efficacy as at least one way of teaching composition. I would not return to the method which this has supplanted, except as circumstances should make it necessary to do so. I feel assured of the practical wisdom of insisting upon the truth that thought, in the widest sense of what we mean by thought, is coin; must not be hoarded, but must be current; and the good thereof consists in mutual and partaken enjoyment and advantage; and of continuing to derive from that truth as much inspiration as possible for young people who may desire to give effective expression to what they have to say.

Extracts from Mr. Carroll W. Robinson's Address

WRITTEN COMPOSITION

"Set your stake, and when you reach it, set it further ahead." is a motto which expresses well, my reason for studying the problem of the school paper in connection with written composition. The following facts seemed to me so significant that I hope they will offer definite suggestions to all high school teachers who have charge of the school paper.

What are the *primary* difficulties? In the smaller high schools, the rapid change of teachers which upsets a *steady* growth of the school paper is one; the number of *pupils* to the teachers is another, (the over-burdened teacher finds it hard to spend time for work other than the routine work.) Further than this, my topic might well read: "How can the school paper work be organized so that the first and second year pupils contribute?" We all admit that we are too prone to rely entirely upon a handful of Juniors and Seniors of exceptional ability, probably in the college course.

Before offering my hints for better editorials, may I state one set rule: Be sure to have a poem at the beginning of every issue, either opposite the editorial page, or before the editorials. An examination of 50 papers will convince you that the palm for ex-

cellence moves toward the paper which begins with that greatest form of composition—poetry. Furthermore, since the paper is written for the pupils, they are apt to start a poem before there is a chance to think. Then if the poem is as good as that "O Driftwood Fire" in the Newton Review (Nov. 17) there is little question but that it will be finished.

After reading a hundred editorials may I appealingly offer a few "don'ts."

1. Don't mention lack of material, lack of spirit, or lack of subscription. Nothing is gained.

2. Don't allow *general* war editorials. Leave the "boys are willing to lay down their lives" sentences to the newspaper editors and platform orators.

3. Don't permit sweeping observations of the universe, such as: "In this great world of ours conditions are ever changing."

4. Don't permit an hysterical rant of generalities about the school team. This type is quite apt to close with, "well, anyway, we have a wonderful team!" Boost the team if real facts are at hand.

5. Don't have school paper box appeals or award prizes. Rely upon the printed "Honorable Mention" column which should appear every month at least. This includes the names of all persons submitting contributions which the staff is unable to use.

* * * * *

Wanted: On Dit, or Man Sagt columns should be turned from the present dribble and drawl into worth while suggestions for school improvement, which can well test the powers of observation of the pupils.

Famous plays and famous poems have always been a prolific source for school paper material, of not a very high order, but material that now and then gives the needed touch of "life."

Remembering that education is for the whole life, and that my problem concerns the high school pupils life, I have reached out into other departments, I have turned "co-operation with the English Department" "inside out", and asked the history, science, and math teachers to have themes written in their classes for use in the school paper.

Not a single school out of the fifty seems to have any scientific organization of its exchange column. It is just hit or miss. One paper reports twenty exchanges including twelve states. One coming from Idaho. Another admits that only three have been received. I believe each school should plan for twenty. Print its list in advance and write to the school announcing it. Ten papers should come from the schools with which the home school plays games. All schools within an athletic debating league should exchange. Then add ten from distant states or better from only those places of similar size. With twenty regular exchanges at hand short stories based on a group of exchanges could be written in any division from freshman to senior. The Salem "Advance" has the only original exchange column that I have seen.

I have told them that I want themes that will boom and boast their department. Of course, they like that. For subjects I have suggested: "Why I Like History," "Why I Elected French," "Lessons from Science." Occasionally, satires almost as keen as Paul Shorey's "Latin" essays are printed.

The finest *book reports* that I found were in the October (1917)

number of the Haverhill H. S. paper. They are 125 word themes praising certain books. The unfortunately wooden divisions of the old-fashioned high school book report are avoided and a few carefully worded and enticing paragraphs are offered.

Much *change* could be made in the *Alumni* department of the school paper. Today, most of them call for *no composition* work whatever. May I object to the tiresome listing of addresses without comment? May I recommend that the *Alumni* column include only the pupils *one* year out of school. The newspapers take care of the rest. It isn't news—not even school news. Why go back to 1894? Then too, the "Grace Smith of Wellesley College spent Thanksgiving at home" note savors of the Bingville Bugle.

I recommend that a list of the past year's graduating class be kept and that the Juniors and Seniors have an occasional class exercise writing up five persons, like character sketches, or biographies of some of the recent graduates. That *would* be written composition. Certainly the present is not.

* * * * *

How can the *Joke* columns be increased and still be good? In Melrose we have adopted the Everett scheme of having a five minute period set aside in the English class-room for the weekly writing of the jokes. By doing this every Friday, much material is collected. Can we not keep the professional joke out of the school paper? Is there not enough humor, witticism or absurdity constantly occurring around school to avoid this?

EDITORIAL NOTES

We regret that the limits of the Leaflet allow us to print entire but one of the three admirable papers presented at the March meeting of our Association.

Mr. Carroll W. Robinson's discussion of The School Paper in Connection with Written Composition has suggested the advisability of holding next autumn a meeting for the improvement of high-school journalism. To such a conference the entire staffs of all our New England school papers would not only be invited but would be asked to participate in the discussion. Furthermore, it would be desirable to have with us a large number of our school principals and superintendents. With a high standard for our journals we shall have a higher standard for all our composition work.

Mr. Samuel Thurber, who retires from the presidency of our Association, has labored with the same diligence and fervor that has distinguished the work of his predecessors in office. His duties have been somewhat more arduous because of the extra program in connection with the December meeting of the New England Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, at Springfield. The three meetings which he has arranged have been markedly successful. The policy emphasized by him of bringing out men and women who have not previously been prominent, deserves special mention and special praise. We commend the policy to our new president and old friend,—Mr. Walter S. Hinchman, whom we cordially welcome to the chair.

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